



Deepwater Horizon Spill And the Brown Pelican: Questions and Answers

May 15, 2010

How has the spill affected brown pelicans?

We don't yet know how the spill will affect brown pelicans. FWS personnel are concerned that many species of wildlife and plants, some already threatened or endangered, face grave risk from the spill. Ground surveys during the last week of April at Breton National Wildlife Refuge, a 5,000-acre wilderness area, found more than 34,000 individual birds including 2,000 nesting pairs of brown pelicans.

Has the brown pelican been removed from the list of threatened and endangered species?

Yes, the brown pelican was previously delisted along the Atlantic Coast of the United States, in Florida, and in Alabama in 1985. In November 2009, the FWS removed the pelican from the list of threatened and endangered species entirely. However, it remains protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

What is a post-delisting monitoring plan?

The draft plan—released in September 2009—describes the post-delisting monitoring that occurs after the brown pelican is removed from the protections of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Post-delisting monitoring verifies that a recovered species remains secure from the risk of extinction after the protections of the ESA are removed.

The post-delisting monitoring plan addresses brown pelican populations that were delisted by the FWS in November 2009. These delisted populations include those along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico from Mississippi to Texas; along the Pacific Coast from British Columbia, Canada, south through Mexico into Central and South America; and in the West Indies. The FWS removed all other U.S. brown pelican populations in Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and northward from the List of Threatened and Endangered Species in 1985.

Will brown pelicans need to be relisted because of the spill?

It would be premature to say because we don't yet know to what degree the spill has affected the brown pelicans. The Endangered Species Act requires that the Service implement a monitoring program for not less than 5 years for all species that have been recovered and delisted. The purpose of this requirement is to develop a program that detects the failure of any delisted species to sustain itself without the protective measures provided by the Act. If at any time during the monitoring program, data indicate that the protective status under the Act should be reinstated, we can initiate listing procedures, including, if appropriate, emergency listing.

What factors will FWS be evaluating in deciding whether the pelican needs to be relisted due to the impact of the spill?

The post-delisting monitoring plan calls for the FWS to monitor colony occupancy and number of nesting pairs. Brown pelican nesting colonies have demonstrated that they are able to rebound from severe events such as hurricanes. However, a continuous decline in nesting pairs and productivity for an extended period and the loss of pelican colonies would be cause for concern. The FWS may determine whether relisting the population as endangered or threatened is warranted based on the severity and duration of the decline, and its effects on the population as a whole.

Was a contaminant spill included as a potential threat in the post-delisting monitoring plan?

Yes, contaminant spills were identified in the draft post delisting monitoring plan.

The FWS is coordinating with state agencies, other federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, and individuals on the best means of assessing the impacts to brown pelicans along the Gulf Coast as a result of the spill.

How will the spill affect the West Coast populations of brown pelicans?

We don't anticipate that the West Coast population of brown pelicans will be affected.

When was the brown pelican placed on the Endangered Species List?

The brown pelican was listed as endangered throughout its U.S. range on October 13, 1970, and in its foreign range on June 2, 1970, because of sharp population declines, the threat of further declines from pesticide-contaminated food supplies, and the uncertain status of the species in other areas where pesticide contamination was expected.

What is the global population estimate for the listed brown pelican?

With an estimated 400,000 pelicans in Peru, the FWS estimates the global population at over 650,000 brown pelicans.